

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

A Male Veterinary Student Reflects on a Course in Women's Leadership

Editor's Note: *Drew Enders is one of three male students who joined 32 female colleagues in a one-day symposium on Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine held at Cornell University on March 1, 2014.¹ A requirement of the course was to interview a woman veterinarian regarding her experiences in some aspect of the profession. Drew's takeaways from the course and his summary of the interview with Dr. Jessica Platz of Colonial Veterinary Hospital in Ithaca, NY are reported in this story.*

Donald F. Smith

By Andrew M. Enders (Guest Author)

April 30, 2014

I've spent the majority of my life, and most importantly the last three years, in a classroom. It was no different on the first Saturday of March when I walked into Cornell's first symposium on women's leadership in veterinary medicine. I was one of only three males in attendance - daunting odds to anyone who hasn't gone to veterinary school in the last two decades. Admittedly, I was a little wary at first, not because of my minority group status, but that as a male, I wouldn't get much out of a women's leadership course or that my opinion on the subject would be an affront to the group of female pioneers around me.

To my surprise and delight, that weekend discussion was completely worthwhile and I feel like my eyes were opened to an omnipresent issue that I was ignorant to beforehand. Throughout the one-day interactive seminar we focused on exploring the role of women and their unequal representation in veterinary leadership. Some of the major themes of the day included discrimination, career ambitions, balancing work with family, applying for and negotiating for associate positions in clinical practice, and mentorship.

The discussion was so fruitful that it prompted me to interview a close friend about her experiences as a young veterinarian. Dr. Platz graduated from Mississippi State University where she earned both the MS and DVM degrees. Since then she has become a certified veterinary acupuncturist, completed a rotating small animal internship, and now works as an associate in a small animal hospital. I chose to interview Dr. Platz because she has accomplished so much in the three short years that I have known her. Furthermore, I value her opinion and have been grateful for the helpful advice she has shared with me over the course of our friendship. Our interview was stimulating, free flowing, and intriguing.



Drew Enders, DVM Class of 2015, participates in a mentoring exercise with three female colleagues (two from his class and one from the Class of 2016) at the course, Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine.
(Photo by the author, 2014)

I was, and continue to be, baffled by the dichotomy between the overwhelming majority of women who make up veterinary classes and their severe underrepresentation in higher positions. Dr. Platz told me that she is not surprised by the inequality,²

Men naturally lean towards more power positions in their early careers; whereas, women both want to work and have a family. I don't see that changing. The onus is on women to come up with ways to get more involved in leadership positions and find a better balance between work and family.

I asked her if she thought it was harder for women to advance themselves in veterinary medicine or the workforce in general. "Yes", she said, "child-bearing is the crux women bear and it's something we can't control, but that issue isn't as big an impediment as it once was."

Stereotypical gender roles with regards to child-care responsibilities are no longer as strong as they were in the past. More women report the desire to have fulfilling careers, while more men are expressing their desire to become more involved in family life and becoming stay-at-home dads.³ Although veterinary medicine may lag behind in this trend, I believe female veterinarians are the epitome of driven, career-seeking women and they need to work to create more of a gender balance for child-care responsibilities in the family.

With regards to leadership roles, Dr. Platz reiterated my own feelings by saying more people in power positions are older and that the older men in power now came from a generation where men made up the majority of veterinary professionals. I believe with time, as newer, younger generations predominately composed of women, begin to take on those positions, a shift will occur in the leadership.

Despite the naturally-occurring shift, the current situation begs us to question, “Why wait?” Strong, independent, brilliant women currently make up the majority of this profession and must make a stand so our leadership reflects their representation.

It’s difficult to control discrimination on all levels, but in a professional setting it shouldn’t be tolerated. During the symposium, an alarming number of my peers relayed stories of experience with male private practice owners who admitted to being hesitant to hire new female graduates because of their fear they would be starting a family soon. These stories struck a cord with me. If the women’s leadership initiative is to succeed, this level of duality, the male and female agenda, in the profession can no longer be tolerated. New graduates are on the precipice of long, rewarding careers after having spent almost two decades in school. They should not have to choose between starting a family and having a career.

I asked Dr. Platz what she would like to see change for women in veterinary medicine. She said she would like to see practices begin to offer paid maternity leave, citing the progressive thinking of other countries that offer both paid maternity and paternity leave. Sadly, at this time she couldn’t name a practice that did offer it. I followed up by asking if she thought most women would feel comfortable bringing up the idea of starting a family during a job interview and Dr. Platz did not think they would. It’s ironic that the idea of starting a family has become taboo in a profession predominantly composed of women.

I find it shameful that women are faced with the dilemma of hiding their desire to start a family from a potential employer out of fear they won’t be hired. I believe women need to defend their self worth and assert their convictions. If they feel like they need to interview for a job under a shroud of deception, rather than with honest open dialogue, then perhaps they need to reevaluate if that practice is truly the place they want to work. At the same time, male veterinarians need to support their female colleagues; excellent qualifications should be the only requirement to fill a position. The workforce at most practices, both veterinarians and veterinary technicians, is overwhelmingly made up of women. Both employer and employees need to be able to discuss family openly so workforce adjustments can be made for the benefit of the entire practice.

At the symposium, we also discussed strategies to improve negotiating skills that included exploring dual MBA programs or devoting clinical externship time to pursuing business externships.

Personally, I can’t imagine the success of the women’s leadership initiative without both genders working together to improve the profession. I had never explored the subject of

women's leadership prior to the symposium and decided to attend with the hope of taking away something new. I had no idea how fascinating the intricacies of the women's leadership initiative is or that I would walk away from that day with lingering thoughts.

I felt immense pride not only for myself, but also for my male peers who also decided to come in on a weekend and show support for the advancement of women's leadership. It's critical that male veterinarians recognize the need to support their female counterparts to ensure the continued betterment of the profession. Since the symposium, I have promoted the ideas of the women's leadership movement with my peers on my clinical rotations. So many of my colleagues (male and female) are unaware of the initiative and I enjoy remaining connected to the movement by serving as liaison between the symposium and the hospital. I am already looking forward to next year's gathering and hope my distribution of information will prompt more of my colleagues to participate.

¹ Smith, Donald F and Julie Kumble. Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine: A Course for Veterinary Students. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, April 2, 2014.

² Platz, Jessica, MS, DVM (Colonial Veterinary Hospital, Ithaca, NY). Interview with Drew Enders (Cornell University DVM student) conducted in person March 8, 2014, and April 18, 2014.

³ Ludden, Jennifer. Stay-At-Home Dads, Breadwinner Moms And Making It All Work. National Public Radio, May 15, 2013.

KEYWORDS:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine
Women in Veterinary Medicine
Andrew Enders
Jessica Platz

TOPIC:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

How can male veterinary students support women's leadership?

META-SUMMARY:

A male veterinary student describes what he learned during a course in women's leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Andrew "Drew" Michael Enders is a member of the Class of 2015 of Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. He was one of three male students who joined 32 female colleagues in a one-day symposium on Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine held at Cornell University on March 1, 2014.